

REVIEW

Susannah Heschel

*The Aryan Jesus:
Christian Theologians and the Bible in Nazi Germany*

(Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2008), hardcover, xvii + 339 pp.

Reviewed by Franklin Sherman,
Muhlenberg College (emeritus)

Susannah Heschel, professor of Jewish Studies at Dartmouth College, gives us in this volume the fruits of her decade-long research in German ecclesiastical and university archives, tracking down the story of one of the leading expressions of the "German Christian" movement. This was the "Institute for the Study and Eradication of Jewish Influence on German Church Life" (*Institut zur Erforschung und Beiseitigung des jüdischen Einflusses auf das deutsche kirchliche Leben*), dedicated to removing all traces of Judaism in Christianity. Based at the University of Jena (although not officially a part of it), the Institute was founded in May 1939, and dissolved in late 1945. Its director and guiding spirit was Walter Grundmann, professor of New Testament at the University, under whose leadership the Institute held numerous conferences and workshops involving scholars, pastors, and church leaders from all over Germany.

Heschel traces in meticulous detail the origin and history of the Institute as well as Grundmann's own career. As early as February 1933 he had published a monograph, "God and Nation: A Protestant Contribution to the Aims of National Socialism and to the Interpretation of [Alfred] Rosenberg" (the prominent Nazi racial theorist). Concerning Adolf Hitler, Grundmann wrote: "In this man there is nothing disunited. He is in himself completely one, completely simple, completely pure. We also know that the power of such a clear and truthful man does not derive from the earth, but rather out of that higher world that the Master, Jesus Christ, called the kingdom of heaven" (p. 190). And this appeared already in 1933!

Affiliation with the Institute was based on the following criteria: "1. Every candidate for membership has to prove that he has a thorough knowledge of racial theory and the laws of heredity. 2. The test can only be passed if it demonstrates that the candidate clearly recognizes the fundamental, unbridgeable antagonism between the Jewish religion and Christian faith and can substantiate that the recognition of this antagonism decisively influences his scholarly and practical work" (p. 80).

One study group sponsored by the Institute devoted itself to the differences between Aryan and Semitic religiosity. Another undertook to prepare a de-Judaized hymnal, which was published in 1941. Hymns written by non-Aryans or implying weakness or passivity were omitted, as were Hebrew terms such as "Hallelujah." The Institute also published a de-Judaized version of the New Testament and a de-Judaized catechism. Other projects were thwarted by the paper shortage during the war.

Heschel's book is painstakingly researched and documented. The bibliography includes some 700 books and articles, including more than 70 by Grundmann alone. Her prose is vivid and carries the reader along in the manner of an unfolding novel. There is some repetition, probably due to the incorporation of some of her earlier articles on the subject, and a topic is sometimes treated partly in one chapter and partly in another. There are also detailed expositions of selected themes, such as the Nazification process in the University of Jena as a whole, which serves as a case study for what took place in many German universities.

The University of Jena had a distinguished intellectual history, especially in the period of Romanticism and German Idealism. However, it was particularly susceptible to the Nazi ideology. Already in 1930, the newly appointed professor of social anthropology, a well-known racial theorist, chose as the theme of his inaugural lecture, "The Causes of the Racial Deterioration of the German Volk." Adolph Hitler was in attendance—the first and last time, according to Heschel's sources, that he ever visited a university (p. 208). In 1933, a State Agency for Racist Measures was established, and Karl Astel, a distinguished professor of medicine at the university, was appointed as its head. This agency collected the names of some 300,000 Thuringian citizens suspected of having congenital diseases and who thus were candidates for sterilization. Later, a professor of pediatrics at the university was appointed director of a children's euthanasia center in a nearby town.

The Jena theological faculty found its special role in this process by undertaking to demonstrate that, contrary to much opinion, Christianity and National Socialism as a whole were not incompatible with one another. Christianity, for its part, had long since proclaimed the insidious nature of the Jews. Now it was prepared to undertake a thorough revision of its theology and practice in the light of *völkisch* ideology. A 1937 letter of recommendation from the rector of the university to the provincial authorities regarding a candidate for the professorship of systematic theology, Heinz Eisenhuth, speaks volumes: "Eisenhuth is an unconditionally reliable member of the Party who is loyal to the Führer and the movement from his innermost convictions. He works with great earnestness to promote the essential insights of National Socialism in his discipline" (p. 219). Eisenhuth was appointed, and he later served as Academic Director of Grundmann's Institute.

After the war, Grundmann managed to reinterpret the purpose of the Institute in such a way as to escape condemnation in the Denazification program. He served thirty more years as a New Testament scholar and teacher, publishing prolifically and gaining an international reputation. His career is comparable in this respect to that of Gerhard Kittel, his doctoral advisor, whose Nazi affinities only came to light long after his "Theological Dictionary of the New Testament" had become a standard reference work.

This is an important and in many ways a chilling book, showing the consequences of a radical effort at coordination (*Gleichschaltung*) of Christ and culture. In terms of method, one notes that Heschel's acknowledgments include an unusually large number of friends and colleagues, both German and American, to whom she is indebted, and she speaks of many seminars and conferences in which her ideas had been worked out and her research tested. In that sense, Susannah Heschel's book is a model of collaborative scholarship, something still rare in the humanities as compared to the natural sciences.

It should be added that the book is richly illustrated, showing key persons, places, and events that provide the context for the narrative. I do have one caveat or caution regarding the book's title. It might be taken to imply that all of the scholars Heschel deals with believed that Jesus literally was an Aryan. Walter Grundmann himself did, positing that Jesus was descended from the non-Jewish populations settled in Galilee after the Assyrian conquest. Others, not accepting

that hypothesis, believed that Jesus was Aryan in effect, if not in fact. He was an Aryan-like hero whose manly virtues stood out all the more against the background of the Jews with whom he had to deal. This, they maintained, is the Jesus whom the church must recover and preach today.

A video of Prof. Heschel discussing her research for this book in a lecture at Boston College can be found at <http://frontrow.bc.edu/program/heschel>.